December 5, 2003

SARS Guidance for Clinical Laboratories

Dear Colleagues:

After many months of work with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and our colleagues here at Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH), we today are providing guidelines for Michigan clinical laboratories on collection, handling and transport of specimens for SARS. This information is largely based upon guidance provided by the CDC but some details have been adjusted to the MDCH SARS response plan. These guidelines are being posted on the MDCH website (http:/www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2945_5104-66297--,00.html).

The MDCH Bureau of Laboratories (BOL) and Bureau of Epidemiology (BOE) have developed a plan for submission of specimens. No samples will be tested until BOE has been consulted and has approved testing. Specimens may be collected but do not submit them for SARS testing until instructed to do so by BOE. BOE will supply an identification number to be entered on the test request accompanying the samples. **All samples and test requests submitted on a given patient must carry this number.**

The Virology Section at MDCH BOL has implemented and fully validated the serology procedure developed by CDC for detecting antibodies to SARS. Antibodies may be detected as early as the first week after onset of symptoms; therefore acute specimens will be tested as soon as submitted. Negative results on acute sera will be reported with a request for submission of a convalescent specimen, which should be drawn no sooner than 28 days post onset. Initially, positive specimens will be reported as final only after confirmation by testing at CDC.

Due to the lack of positive controls, the Molecular Biology Section has implemented but not yet fully validated the PCR procedure developed by CDC for SARS. This means that until a sufficient number of positive samples have been received, an informed consent will need to be completed by the patient. This consent will be coordinated by local public health personnel with the attending physician or infection control personnel, and is also available on the MDCH website. Please do not delay transport to MDCH of samples approved for testing to await the consent.

Preliminary positive results received from non-public health labs must be retested at MDCH BOL, which uses reagents and methods validated at the CDC. Positive results from testing at laboratories outside of the public health system will not be used to determine if the patient meets the epidemiologic case definition. In the absence of SARS cases worldwide, positive results are most likely to be false-positives. Clinical laboratories should save an aliquot of samples sent to commercial or reference laboratories or alternatively collect multiple new samples from the patient to submit to MDCH BOL.

This current guidance will change as disease activity is documented. We will alert laboratories when changes are posted to the website, but please continue to check the website for the most up-to-date specimen collection guidelines. Please contact BOL at 517-335-8063 if you experience difficulties in accessing the website.